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ABSTRACT

A public-relations audit is usually a broad-scale, loosely structured research study exploring a company's public relations both internally and externally. This paper describes the genesis of the public-relations audit, outlines the four major steps involved, and describes circumstances that might make an audit desirable. It lists the types of recommendations that might emerge and notes that such audits are being used increasingly by corporations. (GW)

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The Public Relations Audit: Its Purpose and Uses

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If a company management chooses to ignore its critics, its public relations department cannot be effective.

Public relations specialists have long recognized that "the public" is not a huge, insensate, undifferentiated mass to be dealt with as a single group.

Today, even the most unsophisticated public relations practitioners can identify the different relationships which clearly defined groups of people have with a company—i.e. financial analysts, government officials, consumer activists, suppliers, stockholders, feminists, minority leaders, employees, customers, retailers.

Also, public relations professionals now realize that each of these groups or publics has a separate and distinct impact on a company's ability to conduct its business and achieve its goals.

More and more corporations are developing special communications efforts to tell their stories effectively to each of their publics—that is, to see and be seen, to ask questions and be required to answer questions, to take their share of kudos and lumps. This approach is usually accompanied by an awareness that a company's public relations is often considered to be an important index

of management's performance.

If a company management chooses to ignore its critics, its public relations department cannot be effective and public relations research will be unproductive. What would be the point?

But if a company chooses to be visible, and also wants to listen—then it needs to do its homework carefully in order to decide:

- * What MESSAGE it wants to convey to its public.

- * What VEHICLES would be most effective for delivering that message.

- * How to EVALUATE the environment in which it operates. In other words, how to listen.

One important way companies have been doing their homework in the last few years is by conducting what has come to be known as a public relations audit, or communications audit. This is a relatively new research tool that blends elements of two disciplines: opinion research and public relations.

Before describing how a public relations audit is con-

ducted, a word about the genesis of the audit.

In the last decade, public relations practitioners have discovered how useful research can be in helping a company intelligently define its public relations priorities and create effective PR programming. (Advertising executives routinely factored research into their ad budgets long before the idea was accepted in public relations planning.)

For example, research can help a company: (a) determine how well a company is understood by key audiences; (b) identify misconceptions which may be causing difficulties; (c) measure the effectiveness of specific public relations projects; (d) determine what key people in different fields would like to see the company achieve.

Despite their awareness of the usefulness of research, however, public relations people for years were unable to develop its potential. The problem was that trained market and opinion researchers didn't know enough about public relations, and public

relations people didn't know enough about research. The people identifying the problems were not equipped to recommend solutions.

To overcome this difficulty, public relations and research have been blended—most notably in the public relations audit. These days one hears less about the “role of research in public relations,” than about “the role of *public relations research*.”

Now for the audit. A public relations audit is usually a broad-scale, loosely structured research study exploring a company's public relations both internally and externally. The purpose of the external phase of the audit is to use key members of key publics, in effect, as consultants for the company.

Specifically, the audit begins inside the organization and involves four steps:

1. *Finding out what “we” think:*

This means talking to key people in top and middle management to:

- Assess the company's strengths and weaknesses
- Identify its key publics
- Determine what areas the ex-

A company must listen to what is being said about it and present its case to those audiences most affected.

ternal phase of the audit will cover—that is, the audiences to be interviewed, topics to be explored, line of questioning, etc.

2. *Finding out what "they" think:* This means talking to important publics to find out how closely their views of the company match its executives' own perceptions in key areas.
3. *Evaluating the disparity between the two points of view—*if any exists—to arrive at a public relations balance sheet of assets, liabilities, strengths, weaknesses, etc.
4. *Recommending a comprehensive communications program aimed at closing that gap.*

There's nothing esoteric about this approach, but its value is that it lessens the likelihood of flying by the seat of your pants.

How can the public relations manager or counselor use the communications audit to good advantage? Isn't it risky to expose management to the sometimes harsh realities of how it is perceived by its publics?

In today's business climate, a company must listen to what is being said about it and present

its case to those audiences which are most affected by its policies. Survival may depend on it. Under such circumstances, responsible public relations people must help management initiate the dialogue.

Under what circumstances might a public relations manager make effective use of a communications audit? Here are a few instances:

1. *When the PR manager is new at the job.* An audit can help assess the company's public relations strengths and weaknesses, clarify its public relations goals as perceived by management and recommended by critical audiences, define the functions which should be performed by the PR department and by outside counsel, and indicate the potential value of recommended PR programs.

2. *When the PR manager is planning a public relations program.* Suppose outside pressures are beginning to force management to give up its "low visibility" posture. The audit can help the manager acquaint management with out-

The success or failure of any public relations audit depends on what use is made of it by PR specialists.

side perceptions of the company and provide an intelligent impetus for change.

3. *When there's a new CEO.*

The audit is a good way to find out what the new chief executive's priorities are and also acquaint him with attitudes towards the company found among different groups.

4. *When there is any change in the company's financial condition*—such as drastically increased or decreased earnings, change in dividend rate, balance sheet changes of major proportions, etc.—a financial public relations audit (restricted to financial publics) can be an effective tool for maintaining necessary communications with Wall Street.

5. *When there is a change of magnitude in the company's corporate structure*—such as a new management line-up, consequential acquisition, or restructured division—the audit can alert top management to the type of reception these alterations are receiving from important internal and external audiences.

6. *When the company needs to*

review its corporate identity program or the public relations aspects of its advertising campaigns. Using outside audiences (or experts) as consultants in this area can be especially useful in setting new directions.

7. *When the PR director needs a clearer mandate from management.* In this case, an outside agency could provide needed objectivity.

8. *When an annual or periodic measurement of progress is needed*—both for measurement itself and for reassessing planning priorities.

The circumstances giving rise to the audit may vary, but what all public relations audits have in common is that they force management to define priorities and the publics to be reached.

Undoubtedly the success or failure of any public relations audit depends on what use is made of it by PR specialists—either inside or outside the company. The audit serves little purpose if it does not result in a clear statement of public relations objectives and practical

public relations recommendations.

For example, recommendations might include a public relations program for:

- * Building support for company policies among key audiences.
- * Developing an effective plan to assert company leadership in a particular field.
- * Directing either a general or specialized effort at the professionals in the financial community.
- * Relating a company's activities to general social and economic needs and highlighting the company's contributions in filling those needs.
- * Establishing the basis for company cooperation with community groups, government agencies, the arts, and other elements of society.
- * Providing valuable feedback to management about public attitudes towards company policies and activities in a way that can be helpful to future decision making.

The credibility of business has been under increasing attack and the need for management to be heard and believed

is more critical and relevant than ever before. To have the benefit of an objective body of information about public attitudes rather than subjective impressions is an important asset in developing a sound approach to dealing with this problem.

Intelligent, responsible public relations—which implies a willingness to state one's case candidly and listen respectfully to the publics one serves—can play an important role in helping a company capitalize on its strengths. Just as importantly, it can help to discover the direction by which a company may strive to overcome its weaknesses. The PR audit can provide a valuable management tool to accomplish these purposes and its increasing use is one of the most promising signs of maturity in the modern practice of public relations.



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